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RUDKSR/EUCOM PLANS AND ANALYSES STUTTGART GE PRIORITY
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RHMCSUU/FBI WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000200

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USAID FOR DCHA/OFDA, AID/W for OFDA Rob Andrew & Anne Convery
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E.O. 12958:N/A
TAGS: [MASS](#) [EAID](#) [NATO](#) [SENV](#) [AL](#)
SUBJECT: ALBANIA: FATAL EXPLOSION IN MUNITIONS DEPOT

REF: 07 TIRANA 1064

1. (U) At approximately 11:45 AM (local) March 15, an ammunition storage facility near the town of Gerdec (N41 deg 24 min 40 sec, E19 deg 37 min 52 sec), between Tirana and Durres, caught fire. Shortly after 12:00, a violent explosion destroyed homes in the immediate vicinity of the depot and caused damage to the airport terminal 4.6 miles to the east and some window damage as far away as Tirana 11 miles southeast. The blast was heard in Skopje, Macedonia, over 100 miles to the east. A second explosion a few minutes later was followed by multiple small explosions over the next several hours. The cause of the incident remains unknown, but the Prosecutor General's office has opened an investigation.

2. (U) The facility, one of over 44 sites used to store and/or dismantle ammunition in Albania, was used by the MOD to store a large quantity of 100 mm tank and 120 mm artillery rounds, according to a local EOD specialist. This ammunition, like most of Albania's 100,000 tons of surplus munitions, is over 40 years old and considered extremely unstable and dangerous. The blasts scattered rounds in a two mile radius, and many of them are still live.

3. (U) Media reports to date indicate that some three hundred people were injured, five were killed, and thirty are missing. The number of people who will probably increase since the explosion. The people were working in the facility for the dismantling project. Many injuries were caused by flying glass and shrapnel. Some people with more serious injuries were flown to Italy and Greece for emergency care. Others remain in Tirana's Military Hospital.

4. (U) PM Berisha told the media that an American company, Southern Ammunition Company, Inc. (SACI) based in South Carolina, had recently renewed a contract with the MOD to dismantle ammunition and sell the scrap. (Note: Initial media reports mistakenly called the company "SAIC," an American company previously working on a USG-funded project that successfully and safely completed the destruction of 2,700 metric tons of large naval weapons in December. See RefTel.)

5. (SBU) SACI is a private company without any ties to the USG. In fact, Post sought out the company when we heard they were working on demilitarization, but SACI avoided contact. SACI president Patrick Henry III contacted ODC Chief following the explosion, when

allegations that a U.S. company may have been responsible surfaced. Henry asserted that SACI was not involved in ammunition dismantling at the time and no SACI employees or subcontractors were present in the facility.

¶6. (U) Within three hours of the first explosion, Embassy worked through WAE American physician Dr. Charles Linderman, who assisted at the military hospital, to provide needed medical supplies to the hospital's trauma center, paid for by USAID. Several retired US Army Special Forces personnel in Albania to help train the Albanian Armed Forces volunteered to help secure the area and set up the on-site operations center. American crisis management experts with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Navy, in town for crisis management training, are consulting closely with the Ministry of Interior Crisis Management Center. At the request of the GOA, NAVEUR sent a team of EOD experts to assess the needs and possibilities for military to military EOD assistance; the team arrived March 17. The FBI offered a crime scene investigation and a victim identification team; both were accepted by the Prosecutor's Office. FBI is coordinating arrival. We are consulting with the GOA to determine what additional assistance may be needed and will seek to provide it as requested. Post expects to send a Disaster Declaration for OFDA assistance in the next days. Embassy employees are organizing a cash and in-kind donations collection for the victims.

COMMENT

¶7. (U) Besides the tragic loss of life from this accident, the GOA is now faced with the humanitarian needs of the survivors. The village of Gerdec and an adjoining village were literally flattened, making hundreds homeless. Most of the villagers were farmers who

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will not be able to use their land until it has been cleared of unexploded ordnance by EOD teams. Television scenes from the site some 36 hours after the explosion were eerily quiet, with dead farm animals next to live, abandoned ones in shell-infested fields by destroyed homes.

WITHERS